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ECONOMIC GROWTH

(Energy and Environment)

US, Filipino troops mark Earth Day in Sulu

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Zamboanga City—American and Filipino soldiers in Mindanao, where al-Qaeda-affiliated bandits are active, staged a different war, this time not against lawless elements, but to preserve aquatic resources as they marked the Earth Day 2008 celebration.

Participants from various sectors helped mop up destructive rubbish that has fouled beaches and coral reefs in the violence-prone Sulu province. The province is known for its pristine beach resorts and rich marine reserves.

In just one hour, the cleanup yielded some 600 kilos of debris, including plastic materials and tin cans.

At least 20 unarmed US soldiers, 50 Marines and hundreds of local residents headed by Sulu Gov. Sakur Tan joined the cleanup in barangay Umangay, Patikul town, a known bailiwick of the Abu Sayyaf, a bandit group included on the US list of terrorist organizations.

Muslim and Christian religious leaders, teachers, schoolchildren, local civic organizations, government officials and families helped remove garbage from the shorelines of Patikul.

Famous for its white-powdery sand, the 1.2-mile-long Litayon coast is a major fishing area for Tausugs in Sulu. For local holidaymakers, it is paradise. On fine weekends, many Tausugs spend the day to bask in the sun and bathe in the blue-green waters of the sea.

“We recognize the need for a clean environment and secure the future for our children. We recognize the clean air and water resources for the children. We have made concrete, significant contributions for the Filipino people,” Col. William Coulthrop, commander of the US forces in Mindanao, told a crowd during his speech before the coastal cleanup.

“This is our effort to restore the goodness of environment that we have in the Philippines. We have a common goal in sustaining the environment security. The American people and the United States not only pursue good military strategy, but are in support of the protection of the environment and good governance. We remain your loyal partners in protecting the environment,” Coulthrop added.

The event, dubbed as “Bayanihan para sa Kalikasan,” aimed to reach out to the conflicted towns in the province of Sulu to share the responsibility and accountability in the preservation of marine resources in the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas.

The Sulu Sea is one of the richest fishing grounds in the Philippines. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines share control over this extensive marine environment. It is about 900,000 square kilometers and boasts of 1,800 species of fish, 400 species of algae and over 450 types of coral.

The Unesco World Heritage Site Tubbataha Reef, the best-known site in the Sulu Sea for its 81,000 acres of corals, is also considered the world’s best dive spot for underwater adventure. However, the Tubbataha Reef is not spared from destruction. Fishermen from neighboring countries frequent the area to catch fish using destructive methods like dynamite and cyanide fishing, damaging and killing the corals.

The pearls from the Sulu archipelago are considered as the world’s finest. Previously gathered extensively in the entire sea, Sulu pearls are now gathered only in the extreme southwest of Marungas Island. In the last decades Sulu pearls commanded high prices in the world market when the region produced millions of high-quality pearls every year.

Today, however, some of the most expensive Sulu pearls are in the possession of the wealthiest in Europe. Conservationists blame the number of increasing illegal fishermen exploiting the seas. This has killed the once-thriving pearl industry of Sulu.

“The United States recognizes that protection of the environment is crucial to economic growth,” said Elzadia Washington, deputy chief of mission of the United States Agency for International Development in Manila.

“Coastal cleanup is not just about pollution cleanup, it is also toxic- waste prevention,” shares Datu Fasher Julkanain, the village chief of Umangay.

Datu Fasher understands that the cleanup centers on educating and empowering the people of Sulu to become a part of the marine debris solution. “People must be made conscious that there will be no debris to collect if people in the first place will not toss waste, especially the nonbiodegradable ones anywhere, much less on the beach where the waves will wash the litter to the sea,” he added.

Datu Fasher was shocked after learning that styrofoam ware that enter the coast rot only after 18 years, while it takes 50 years for a tin can to corrode. He was even more shocked when informed that it takes 1 million years for a glass bottle that enters the sea to disintegrate.

The women in Sulu are also supporting the initiatives to save the marine ecosystems. “Working to clean our polluted coastline reminds us of our responsibility toward our children’s future. Together, let’s help realize our children’s dream of a green environment.”

Tetchie Cruz-Capellan, chief of the Alliance for Mindanao Off-grid Renewable Energy Program, said the group has launched its ultimate weapon against the destruction of Sulu Sea by protecting its vibrant ecosystem from further damage through a daylong cleanup.

“This is a major concern for us since thousands of our beneficiaries in Sulu depend largely on the Sulu Sea for livelihood. Millions of people depend on the Sulu Sea for food. The sea provides opportunities for all people,” Capellan said.

“Everyone has a stake in the conservation of the Sulu Sea. Our fundamental role here is to be able to use the Sulu Sea sustainably into the distant future. The aim of the day is to raise awareness and create an understanding among our community of the environmental issues that we face. In the end it will be up to Sulu people themselves to keep their sea productive,” she explained.